

**QUALITY IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING FOR THE
AUTO-MECHANICAL TECHNICIANS IN GOVERNMENT VOCATIONAL
TRAINING CENTRES IN THE SULTANATE OF OMAN, AND THE
ATTITUDES OF OMANIS TOWARDS VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND
TRAINING ARE MAJOR CONCERNS FOR THE OMANISATION: A CASE STUDY
OF IBRI GOVERNMENT VOCATIONAL TRAINING CENTRE**

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to probe into the quality standards of Auto-mechanical Technicians in Vocational Education and Training in the Government Vocational Training Centres in the Sultanate of Oman, and in particular in the Ibri Government Vocational Training Centre, and how the quality and attitudes of the Omanis towards vocational jobs affect the Omanisation of the private sector. In addition this study aims at providing a model to develop the quality in VET in Ibri GVTC and propose recommendations for the strict implementation of Omanisation policies in succeeding to replace the expatriate workforce in vocational jobs in the private sector as the Omanisation in this sector is moving like a snail.

KEYWORDS: Auto-Mechanical, Attitudes to Manual Labour, Omanisation, Private Sector, Quality, and Vocational Education and Training

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INTRODUCTION

Background of Omanisation

The Sultanate of Oman has been keen in its commitment to reduce migrant labour (currently 0.7 million) and thereby to Omanise the workforce. With the publication of Oman's Third National Development Plan (1980-1985) which proposed the replacement of expatriate labour with similarly skilled, trained and highly educated Omani nationals, 'Omanisation' came into being (Al-Farsi 1994).

Shortly after the Third Five Year Plan (in 1987) an investigation was conducted on the obstacles that might hinder the policy to achieve total Omanisation within 20-30 years (Pridham 1987). The survey indicated that the main obstacles were the quantity and quality of the work force. It was a surprise that 26.7% of the random sample of employers expressed their views that 'national manpower is under-skilled, under experienced and under-trained' (Pridham 1987:4). The same survey also revealed that 20% of employers saw Omani nationals as having poor attitudes to vocational work. They preferred white collar jobs. Despite Government's efforts, studies on manpower indicate that Oman is still heavily dependent expatriate labour from different Asian countries like

India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, etc. According to the Ministry of Manpower statistics for 2005, Omanis constitute a mere 25% of the labour force in the private sector (up from 15% in 1995), and 88% in the public sector (up from 68% in 1995).

Source: <http://www.moneoman.org/2020 - details4.htu/>.

Background of Attitudes and Challenges in VET in Oman

Firstly, despite the social and economic change in Oman, quality standards in VET are below the expectance. Secondly there are many misguided social attitudes, often legacies of the past, still hinder the development of GVTCs' trainees, especially with regards to manual work (Bahaon, 1999; Ali, 1999; Al Balushi, 1999; Al Shanfari, 1991; 1990). Therefore, a negative view of manual and industrial work still prevails to a large extent in Oman to the extent that the majority of planners of educational programmes, especially those who work in the field of VET, rank this as the main challenge face VET graduates (Al Marzooki, 1994). Additionally, the changing nature of today's employment picture is creating new challenges for VET employers and employees alike, leading to those employers being faced with a shrinking labour pool, and encountering many applicants who have minimum job competencies (Lankard, 1990; General Directorate of Vocational Training, 2004).

Furthermore, there is every need for indigenization of the labour force and a reduction in the percentage of the expatriate population and workers. Moreover, high dropout rate from GVTCs has increased to (840) trainees in 2009/2010 (Ministry of Manpower, 2011). Another main challenge is that most of the trainees in these centres do not have English language which it is very important for the private companies (Ministry of Manpower, 2011; Samman, 2010). Finally, against this sombre economic background, VET is under pressure to deal with a host of employment and workplace challenges (Samman, 2010; Shah, 2006; Shah, 2005; Metwally, 2003). These issues affect VET in Oman that lead to increase the number of unemployed graduates from GVTCs.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this research works on the quality of VET in the auto-mechanical course in Ibri GVTC, and is based on a number of factors so as to ensure that all relevant and significant sources are fully attended to. The auto-mechanical course offered in VET in Ibri GVTC is to be assessed from different perspectives and levels. The best contributors to the research work would be those people personally involved, especially those in the front line, namely the students, the teaching staff, employers of technicians in the private sector, and the graduates themselves, and the citizens. Thus, separate questionnaires are targeted at each of these groups. A set of coordinated procedures will be drawn up in order to reach the objectives of the study. In association with the survey of perceptions of the quality in VET in Ibri GVTC, a study will also be made on the effect of pre-entry qualifications on the performance of the course, as well as on the evolutionary development of the curriculum. It is felt helpful to probe into the evolution of curriculum developments. In this research a mixed methodology is followed. Survey Questionnaires, Interviews and Discussions are used as methods in the collection of data apart from the personal observation and authentic record verification in Ibri GVTC.

A pilot study will be done, and its process will be presented. An account will also be given of further corroborative investigation, in the form of group discussions and interviews following the questionnaire survey. Consultation of archival documents and records will be noted, as is consultation of examiners' reports and various relevant Institute boards and policy papers concerning quality.

In any research, there are many tools and techniques of data collection. Each has advantages and disadvantages. The choice lies on the appropriateness to the purpose of the research and to the means at the researcher's disposal. For this study the following tools and techniques are used.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire is an important instrument of research, a tool for data collection. It is not some sort of official form or a set of questions, which has been casually jotted down without much thought (Oppenheim, 1992:100). It takes many weeks of planning, reading, design and exploratory pilot work to determine the specification for a questionnaire.

Survey

The survey method is used in this research. Oppenheim (1992) says that each survey has its own particular problems and it is possible to present some general considerations that have to be borne in mind about which decisions will have to be made. The decisions are: the type of data collection instruments needed to meet the specific objectives of the survey; the size of the survey; the population upon which the survey is focused; the method of approach to respondents to be used; the constraints (financial resources and time) to be faced; the build-up of question sequences within the questionnaire; the type of question to be used: e.g. 'closed' questions with pre-coded answer categories versus free-response questions.

Interview

Another tool used in this study is interview. The researcher will interview all the staff involved in the Auto-mechanical Section including the Basic skills HOD, Principal, Employers of firms, Student Affairs Head and the Vocational Guidance Department HOD. 10 citizens from different walks of life will be interviewed. All the interviews will be video-taped unless there is objection from the respondents. The subject matter of the interview is on the topic of Omanisation of private sector and citizens' attitudes to the manual work. Interview is the mirror image of the advantages and disadvantages of questionnaires (Oppenheim, 1992:102). The interview can supplement the questionnaires. An interview requires interpersonal skills of a high order. It is not an ordinary conversation and it is a one-way process. "The interview can yield rich material and can often put flesh onto the bones of questionnaire responses" (Bell, 1987: 70).

Study of Archival Documents and Records

Statistical records, student files, policy documents, annual reports, meeting minutes and instructions concerning the course and the course document of similar course in other institutions will be obtained and studied. Relevant information could thus be made available for processing. The strength of documentary analysis is that it involves low cost, brings together previously unrelated materials to illuminate a topic, enables access into the past in a way that no other method can, and increases knowledge on topics by bringing materials to light which have not previously had wide circulation. It is an unobtrusive part of a triangulation process.

Study of Reports of External Examiners

Examination results are an objective measure of the quality of the course. They make comments on the standard of the examination papers as well as on the students' performance in examination. This contributes external opinion on the

quality of the course. Compilation and analysis of these documents and information will be made to serve as a very valuable triangulation to the findings through other approaches.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The data obtained was computed and analysed. Computer expertise help was sought in preparing tables, graphs, and charts for the illustration. The results of the surveys, interviews and discussions were presented in tables and graphical illustration as per the objectives and hypothesis. As a supplement to the discussion on topics related to the main survey, such as the course that the research relates to, and development and changes in the curriculum, the entry qualifications to the course were also described. The quality assurance system to be applied, the recommendations for the Omanisation of the private sector were introduced and discussed at the end with a consideration of its adaptability to the field of VET in GVTCs.

The researcher gave a clear picture of the quality in Ibri GVTC on the areas like a) the Course, b) Physical Resources, c) Teaching Methodology, d) Academic Staff, e) Trainees / technicians, f) Assessment, g) Curriculum Design and Development, h) Quality of Teaching and Learning, i) Standards Attained by Students, i) Course Operation and Management, and j) The Evolutionary Changes of Course Curriculum.

The researcher intended to cover the changes that took place in the curriculum for the auto-mechanical technicians. The Changing Course Curriculum, Changes in Contact Hours and Modes of Delivery, Changes in Categorised Subject Groups, Environmental, Safety and Quality Awareness was discussed with graphs and charts. Next the effects of pre-entry qualifications were dealt. It was followed by Quality of the Course. Under this section the topics for discussion were Appropriateness of the Course, Employment Situation of the Graduates, The Course Curriculum, Students' Communication Proficiency and Ability to Express, Technical Proficiency of the Course. The Course Management and Administration, Staff Workload, Staff Quality, Teaching Aids and Methodology, Teaching Aids, Centre Facilities and support (library, computers, use of IT in Teaching and Learning, Student Counseling facilities, Support on Staff Development) were presented. Apart from the above the attitudes of the Omani citizens towards labour work or vocational work was dealt. The ways the Government can follow to fully Omanise the private sector (auto-mechanical arena) with auto-mechanical technicians and the difficulties faced and the ways and means to overcome was discussed as per the objectives.

DISCUSSIONS

Questionnaires did not emerge fully-fledged. Every aspect of a survey had to be tried out beforehand to make sure that it worked as intended (Oppenheim, 1992). Pilot study of the questionnaires started in March, 2012. The purpose was to minimize ambiguity of the measuring of the questions; to optimize the kind and number of relevant questions; to test the appropriateness of the format; to analyse the results and to take heed of any issues that could be further explored in the interviews and discussions. The value of pilot work was not to be underestimated. The pilot survey participants were requested to respond the pilot questionnaire as well as to make comments on the questions.

"Piloting can help us not only with the wording of questions but also with procedural matters such as the design of a letter of introduction, the ordering of question sequences and the reduction of non-response rates. We should realise from the beginning that pilot work is expensive and time-consuming, but avoiding or skimping on pilot work is likely to prove more costly still" (Oppenheim, 1992: 47).

Judgement sampling in pilot survey was carried out. A total of 25 pilot survey questionnaires were given to all categories of respondents in the following manner: 10 questionnaires to students of second and final years; 5 questionnaires to graduates in employment and in further study; 5 questionnaires to employers; 5 questionnaires to instructors in the workshop and Basic Skills Department.

The rationale for selecting this sampling population for the pilot study was that it would cover all categories of target respondents. So all types of specific questionnaires had been tried out, tested, commented on and could serve the purposes of the pilot study.

In the field of VET in the Sultanate of Oman, an account of educational theory in general, but also of the specific expectations and requirements of the industries to which vocational education is related was noted. Thus, in formulating a framework and argument for this research, on the quality of VET for the auto-mechanical technicians in Ibri GVTC and, issues related to the policies of the Government regarding Omanisation, and the attitudes of Omanis on the vocational jobs, a review of relevant literature on the Omani private sector that is useful was referred.

This theoretical framework attempted to link and intertwined the core ideas on quality in VET with the objectives of the teaching courses, assessments of these, student development and learning outcomes. Since any measurement of quality should be based on a coherent philosophy of what constitutes 'quality' in VET in Ibri GVTC, this study started with an interrogative discussion of the various conceptions of VET, its quality and objectives. Further, this study made a vivid picture of the Government policies related to Omanisation, the role of the Ministry of Manpower, and other related literature were explored. A clear literature review on the psychological attitudes, and the challenges that Omanis face in obtaining employment were described. A complete study of the literature was made on the private sector of Oman. Finally, a perspective was suggested which guides the concept of quality and its assessment put forward in this research, and underlined Omanisation concerns in the private sector and for what students had learnt and to what extent this was attributable to the trainees of the Ibri GVTC.

CONCLUSIONS

By carrying out this study, it was hypothesized that changes in curriculum and approach to teaching and learning would bring about improvement enhancing the quality of the course. As a result, the quality of vocational trainees would be improved meeting the expectations of Omani industry. This study would attempt to identify the area(s) of concern. The research would probe into the teaching and learning, aspects of students' attitude, interest, ability and workload; teaching staff's ability, workload, morale, development and Ibri GVTC's resources, management and quality policy.

A study on the changes in auto-mechanical curriculum over time would provide helpful and valid clues in the development of a quality model. The analysis was expected to show the curriculum changes are designed to meet the needs of the private sector changing environment and society. The background reasons and the approaches of making the changes are hopefully useful for the planning and operation of future auto-mechanical course. With the envisaged change of admission criteria, resulting from the education reform in Oman, it would be helpful to carry out a study on the performance of the 'Grade 8th and 9th' entrants and compare it with the (Grade 12) entrants in the vocational course. By extending the research to cover this part of study, it was hoped to obtain findings that could shed light on the significance of entry qualifications to the study of auto-mechanical course.

It was hoped that the recommended holistic strategic framework for the Omanisation would tackle hypothetical issues in the implementation of proposed Omanisation recommendations for the private sector. Omanisation is a devoted campaign meant not only to ensure job for each Omani citizen but also to reduce dependence on expatriates in search of self-reliance in human resource by the Ministry of Manpower, the Sultanate of Oman. The unemployment rate has been steadily increasing in the vocational jobs. It is hoped that the citizens realize the need for the Omanisation by changing their attitudes towards vocational jobs.

In Oman, the significance of VET is realised in order to deliver skilled human resources to meet the shortage in the labour market needs and to cope with the Omanisation plans. Thus, there has been increased interest in attending VET centres and the number of trainees who enroll in these centres has increased considerably. However, despite this evident government supports, VET still faces some problems.

Summarizing from the research, the overall understanding of VET is essentially what was being considered under this umbrella was the preparation of low and middle level skilled and semi-skilled technicians for quite specific occupations that are required in order to ensure the social and economic development of Omani labour market. The findings showed that the VET in Oman still faces several challenges such as social misconceptions about manual labour, lack of vocational training guidance and counseling, lack of awareness of VET importance and high dropout rate from Government Vocational Training Centres (GVTCs). Another main finding was that society's attitudes towards VET ought to be changed through designing programmes in the media.

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